

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

MONEY & DEBT

"MONEY & DEBT" - SCRIPTURES

Jewish Text 1

Exodus (Shemot) 22: 24-26

כֹּד אִם-כֶּסֶף תִּלְוֶה אֶת-עַמִּי אֶת-הָעֲנִי עִמָּךְ לֹא-תִהְיֶה לוֹ כֹּנֵן
לֹא-תִשְׁיָמוֹן עָלָיו וְנִשְׁךְ.
כִּי אִם-חֵב לִתְחַבֵּל שְׁלֵמַת רֵעֶךָ עַד-בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ תִּשְׁיָבֵנוּ לוֹ.
וְהָיָה כִּי הוּא כָסוּתָהּ לְבִדָּהּ הוּא שְׂמָלְתוֹ לְעָרוּ בְּמָה יִשְׁכָּב
כִּי-יִצְעַק אֵלַי וְשָׁמַעְתִּי כִּי-חַנּוּן אֲנִי.

Exodus (Shemot) 22: 24-26

²⁴ If you lend money to My people, to the poor man among you, you shall not be to him like a creditor; you shall not impose interest upon him. ²⁵ If you should indeed take in pledge your fellow man's clothing, before the sun goes down you shall return it to him. ²⁶ For that is his only covering, it is his clothing for his skin; in what can he lie down? And so, when he cries out to Me, I shall hear him, for I am compassionate.

Glosses

- v. 24: 'money' - *kesef*. The word literally means 'silver'; there were no coins at this stage of history, but ingots of metal were used as a means of exchange.
- v. 26: 'when he cries out to Me' - *ki-yits'aq elai*. The root *ts-'q*, meaning 'to cry out', 'to scream', is used earlier in Exodus to describe the Israelites' crying out to God when they are suffering as slaves.

Jewish Text 2

Leviticus (Vayikra) 19: 9-15, 35-36

ט וּבִקְצֹרְכֶם אֶת-קְצִיר אֲרֻצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֵךְ לְקַצֹּר
וְלָקַט קְצִירְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט.
י וְכִרְמְךָ לֹא תַעֲזוֹלֵל וּפְרֹט פְּרִמְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט לְעַנִּי וְלִגֵּר תַּעֲזוֹב
אֲתָם אֲנִי ה' אֵל קִיְיָכֶם.
יא לֹא תִגְנֹבוּ וְלֹא-תִכְחָשׁוּ וְלֹא-תִשְׁקְרוּ אִישׁ בְּעֵמִיתוֹ.
יב וְלֹא-תִשָּׁבְעוּ בְשֵׁמִי לְשָׁקֵר וְחִלַּלְתָּ אֶת-שֵׁם אֵל קִיְיָ אֲנִי ה'.
יג לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה קֶאֱתָרֶעֶךָ וְלֹא תִגְזֹל לֹא-תִלִּין פְּעֻלַת שְׂכִיר
אֶתְךָ עַד-בֹּקֶר.
יד לֹא-תִקַּלְל חֵרֶשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֶר לֹא תִתֵּן מְכֹשׁ לְוִירְאָתָהּ
מֵאֵל קִיְיָ אֲנִי ה'.
טו לֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ עֲוֹל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא-תִשָּׂא פְנֵי-דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי
גְדוֹל בְּצַדֵּק תִּשְׁפֹּט עִמִּיתְךָ.

Leviticus (Vayikra) 19: 9-15, 35-36

⁹ And when you reap the harvest of your land you shall not finish off the edge of your field, nor pick up the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ And your vineyard you shall not strip bare, nor pick up the fallen fruit of your vineyard; for the poor and for the stranger you shall leave them: I am the Lord your God. ¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully; and you shall not lie to each other. ¹² You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. ¹³ You shall not defraud your fellow man and you shall not rob; you shall not keep a hired man's wages with you till morning. ¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf, and before the blind you shall not put a stumbling-block; and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. ¹⁵ You shall do no iniquity in justice; you shall not favour the poor and you shall not defer to the rich; in righteousness you shall judge your fellow.

³⁵ You shall do no iniquity in justice—in measure, whether in weight or in liquid measure. ³⁶ Honest scales, honest weights, an honest *efah*-weight and an honest *hin*-measure shall you have: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Glosses

- v. 10: 'the stranger' - *ger*. Sometimes translated as 'resident alien', in the Torah this refers to someone who is not a member of the people but who lives among them; such a person would not have land and thus could not support him- or herself.

- v. 15: 'you shall not favour the poor' - *lo-tisa fenei-dal*. Literally: 'you shall not lift up the face of the poor'.
- v. 15: 'you shall not defer to the rich' - *velo tehedar penei gadol*. Literally: 'you shall not honour the face of the great [man]'.

Jewish Text 3

Proverbs (Mishlei) 11: 24-28; 16: 8; 23: 4-5

כד יֵשׁ מְפַזֵּר וְנוֹסֵף עוֹד
וְחַיֵּשֶׁךְ מִיֵּשֶׁר אֶךְ-לְמַחְסוֹר.

כה נָפֵשׁ-בְּרָכָה תִּדְשֵׁן
וּמְרֻנָּה גַם-הוּא יוֹרָא.

כו מִיַּעַבְרֵי בָרִי יִקְבְּהוּ לְאוֹם
וּבְרָכָה לְרֵאשִׁית מִשְׁבִּיר.

כז שֶׁחֵר טוֹב יִבְקֹשׁ רְצוֹן
וְדִרְשׁ רָעָה תִּבּוֹאֶנּוּ.

כח בּוֹטֵחַ בְּעֵשָׂרוֹ הוּא יִפּוֹל
וְכָעֲלָה צַדִּיקִים יִפְרָחוּ.

ח טוֹב-מַעַט בְּצַדִּיקָה
מִרֵּב תִּבּוֹאוֹת בְּלֹא מִשְׁפָּט.

ד אֶל-תִּיגַע לְהַעֲשִׂיר
מִבִּינְתֶךָ חֶדְלִי.

ה הַתְּעוֹף (הַתְּעִיף) עֵינֶיךָ בּוֹ וְאֵינְנוּ
כִּי עָשָׂה יַעֲשֶׂה-לוֹ כְּנַפְיָם
כְּנֹשֶׁר וְעִיף (יְעוֹף) הַשָּׁמַיִם.

Proverbs (Mishlei) 11: 24-28; 16: 8; 23: 4-5

²⁴ One man distributes [his wealth] and ends up with more;
Another holds back from doing right and incurs a loss.

²⁵ A generous person enjoys prosperity,
One who satisfies others shall be satisfied himself.

²⁶ He who holds back grain will be cursed by the people,
But blessings fall on the head of the one who provides grain for others.

²⁷ He who seeks the good desires what is pleasing,
But he who searches out evil—it shall come upon him.

²⁸ He who trusts in his wealth shall fall,
But the righteous shall flourish like foliage.

⁸ Better is a little with righteousness
Than great wealth with injustice.

⁴ Do not toil to become rich,
Have the sense to stop.

⁵ Your eye beholds [wealth], then it is gone;
It surely grows wings and flies away,
Like an eagle, heavenwards.

Glosses

These proverbs all conform to a three-part formula, with a strong metric beat: two short phrases with two stresses in each, followed by a longer phrase with three stresses:

v. 26: *monéa bár | yiqvúhu le'óm*
uverakháh lerósh mashbír.

v. 24: 'from doing right' - *miyosher*. The root *y-sh-r* means 'straight, 'honest', 'upright'.

v. 25: 'a generous person' - *nefesh-berakhah*. Literally: 'an individual/soul of blessing'.

Christian Text

Matthew 18: 23-35

²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Glosses

- v. 23: 'servants' – the singular is *doulos*, lit. 'bondservant' or 'slave'. There is debate about whether this word might denote not only a slave but also a court official or minister, in which case the 'servant' here could be a tax gatherer or a finance minister (as could the other 'servants' later in the parable). The usual New Testament sense of the word, though, is of someone who legally did not belong to himself but to his master, and who was entirely bound to his master's will and whim.
- v. 24: 'talents' – *talanton*, a talent was a monetary unit worth about twenty years' wages for a labourer. Ten thousand of these represent simply untold riches. It is a debt of unheard-of proportions.
- v. 27: 'pity' – *splanknistheis*, also, 'compassion'.
- v. 28: 'denarii' – *denaria*, a day's wage for a labourer.
- v. 29: 'pleaded' – *parekalei*, can also mean 'encouraged' and 'exhorted', and is a word associated in the New Testament with the Holy Spirit (called 'the Paraclete').
- v. 29: 'have patience' – *makrothumeson*, lit. 'breathe long'.
- v. 30: 'refused' – *ethelen*, lit. 'willed not', 'did not want'.
- v. 31: 'distressed' – *lupe*, a word implying intense feeling, deep down.
- v. 34: 'jailers' – *tois basanistais*, lit. 'torturers' or 'tormentors'.

Islamic Text [Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-Baqarah ('The Cow', 2: 274-283)

²⁷⁴ Those who spend of their goods by night and by day (in charity), in secret and in public, have their reward with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

²⁷⁵ Those who devour usury will not stand except as stand one whom the Evil One by his touch has driven to madness. That is because they say: 'Trade is like usury', but Allah has permitted trade and forbidden usury. Those who, after receiving direction from their Lord, desist, shall be pardoned for the past; their case is for Allah (to judge); but those who repeat (the offence) are companions of the Fire: they will abide therein (for ever).

²⁷⁶ Allah will deprive usury of all blessing, but will give increase for deeds of charity: for He loves not creatures ungrateful and wicked.

²⁷⁷ Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and establish regular prayers and regular charity, will have their reward with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

²⁷⁸ O you who believe! Fear Allah, and give up what remains of your demand for usury, if you are indeed believers.

²⁷⁹ If you do it not, take notice of war from Allah and His Messenger. But if you turn back, you shall have your capital sums: deal not unjustly, and you shall not be dealt with unjustly.

²⁸⁰ If the debtor is in a difficulty, grant him time till it is easy for him to repay. But if you remit it by way of charity, that is best for you if you only knew.

²⁸¹ And fear the day when you shall be brought back to Allah. Then shall every soul be paid what it earned, and none shall be dealt with unjustly.

²⁸² O you who believe! When you deal with each other, in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties: let not the scribe refuse to write: as Allah has taught him, so let him write. Let him who incurs the liability dictate, but let him fear his Lord Allah, and not diminish aught of what he owes. If the party liable is mentally deficient, or weak, or unable himself to dictate, let his guardian dictate faithfully, and get two witnesses, out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as you choose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her. The witnesses should not refuse when they are called on (for evidence). Disdain not to reduce to writing (your contract) for a future period, whether it be small or big: it is juster in the sight of Allah, more suitable as evidence, and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourselves, but if it be a transaction which you carry out on the spot among yourselves, there is no blame on you if you reduce it not to writing. But take witness whenever you make a commercial contract; and let neither scribe nor witness suffer harm. If you do (such harm), it would be wickedness in you. So fear Allah. For it is Allah that teaches you. And Allah is well acquainted with all things.

²⁸³ If you are on a journey, and cannot find a scribe, a pledge with possession (may serve the purpose). And if one of you deposits a thing on trust with another, let the trustee (faithfully) discharge his trust, and let him fear his Lord. Conceal not evidence; for whoever conceals it, his heart is tainted with sin. And Allah knows all that you do.

Gloss

ayah 276: 'increase' - literally 'usury'.

"MONEY & DEBT" – TRADITIONS OF READING

JEWISH TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The first two texts both come from the first and most important part of the Tanakh (the Jewish Bible)—the Torah ('Teaching'). Consisting of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the Torah is traditionally believed to have been given by God to Moses (c. 1250 BCE). The formal chanting of the Torah is the central part of synagogue worship on the sabbath (on Saturday morning); the entire Torah, divided into some fifty portions, is read from beginning to end each year, including these two texts.

The second book of the Torah, Exodus (Shemot), recounts the story of the Israelites' sufferings in Egypt under Pharaoh; Moses' encounter with God and (rather reluctant) acceptance of his mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the land promised to their ancestors by God; and God's mighty acts in delivering them from slavery there. After crossing the Red Sea, which God divides to make a path for the people, they make their way to Mount Sinai. There they receive the Ten Commandments, and the book continues with more of the legislation given by God to Moses. The text presented here forms part of a long section dealing with slavery, violence, injuries caused by both people and animals, theft, gossip, festivals, and other issues.

The second text comes from a similar lengthy passage in the third book of the Torah, Leviticus (Vayikra). Much of the book deals with the laws of sacrifices and ritual purity, but its heart is the 'Holiness Code', a long section of laws that cover a huge range of everyday situations. Its position at the very centre of the Torah implies the centrality of just and ethical behaviour in the way God commands us to live.

The third text is from Proverbs (Mishlei), a book in the third section of the Jewish Bible: *Ketuvim* ('Writings': consisting of the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles), which date from different periods, from the time of King David (c. 1000 BCE) to about the second century BCE.

King Solomon is traditionally credited with writing the book of Proverbs, though the book itself names several different authors of the proverbs it contains, such as Agur and Lemuel. Many of the proverbs are concerned with the desirability of obtaining wisdom and living by it, or warn of the consequences of folly and wickedness. The book of Proverbs is not read formally in synagogue, and is thus not very familiar to most Jews, but phrases taken from it do appear in the prayerbook, and there exists a rich tradition of commentary on the book as a whole.

Points to Consider

- Do these texts claim that money is evil in and of itself?
- What should guide the use of money or wealth according to these texts?
- What limits do these texts place upon the use of money or wealth?

The Text in Tradition and Today

In Jewish thought, money has no special status but is essentially one of many types of resources available to mankind, all of which must be used with responsibility and attention to God's will.

The Torah was given in a society in which almost everyone earned their living from the land, by farming and keeping domestic animals, and provision was made for the produce of the land to be distributed fairly, so that vulnerable members of society would not starve. Land was passed down through the male line, so those at risk were widows, orphans (i.e. children whose father had died), strangers who came from elsewhere, and the Levites, the only one of the twelve tribes that did not receive a land allocation when the Israelites entered the Land of Israel. The Levites' task was to guard and manage the central sanctuary—first the Tabernacle (*mishkan*) that had been constructed in the Sinai desert, after the Exodus from Egypt, and later on the Temple of Jerusalem. The Levites and their 'subclan', the priests (*kohanim*), were responsible for sacrificial worship, liturgical music, national and individual rites, and also for transmission of Torah knowledge and judgement. In return, the Torah commands those who work the land to give a series of 'taxes' or tithes of their agricultural produce to support the Levites and priests.

A series of agricultural regulations (some of which appear in Text 2) specify further produce that must be made available to both the Levites and the vulnerable members of society, and the Israelites are commanded to lend money to those who need it, and are forbidden to take interest for this. Nevertheless, people often ignored these commandments, and the books of the prophets are full of denunciations of those who enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and weak. The prophet Isaiah (c. 740-701 BCE) thunders:

Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one loving bribes and greedy for gifts; they do not judge the case of the orphan and the widow's cause never reaches them!

(Isaiah 1: 23)

Accumulation of wealth is often associated with idolatry, neglect of the poor, and corruption, but the problem is with those who commit these sins, not with the idea of riches as such. Text 3 holds up those who are generous with their wealth as examples to be emulated. Rabbinic sources stress the ideal of giving *tsedaqah*—generally translated as 'charity', but actually a completely different concept. The word *tsedaqah* means 'righteousness' or 'justice', so by giving money to those who need it one is maintaining a just society and

carrying out a divine obligation, rather than acting on the basis of sympathy or emotion. It is in this sense that *tsedaqah* is linked with repentance and prayer in a trio that ‘annuls the divine decree’ of punishment for sin.

Simple donations are not at the top of the ladder of *tsedaqah*: the great philosopher Maimonides (1138-1204) listed eight ‘rungs’ of *tsedaqah*, of which the highest is enabling a person to earn his or her own living. Hospitality in one’s own home is also another form of *tsedaqah*, especially on the sabbath and festivals:

One should be careful to feed the poor at one’s table, and to send gifts to the poor, as it is written: ‘Send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared’ (Nehemiah 8: 10). Rabbi Israel Isserlein, of blessed memory [15th century], said: Every man ought to pray that poor individuals come his way, for if poor folk do not, taxes and other such things will.

(Joseph ben Moses, *Leket Yosher* [legal work], 15th century)

In other words, if you don’t distribute those resources to which you have access voluntarily, you will have to do it involuntarily!

In the same spirit, Jewish communities all over the world have set up *gemachs* (an acronym of *gemilut chasadim*—‘deeds of kindness’), free loan funds of both money and equipment. Any sizeable community will have dozens of these, both large and small—some making financial loans, others maintaining stores of equipment and lending it out. There are *gemachs* for everything from wedding dresses to crockery, from wigs to baby clothes, from chairs to crutches.

The community dimension brings us back to the central idea: money and all types of resources are gifts from God, to be used wisely and responsibly for the benefit of the entire community, rather than being selfishly hoarded for the benefit of a few individuals. Greater riches entail greater responsibilities. And true wealth is not linked to money—the second-century CE sage Ben Zoma said: ‘Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot.’

A Muslim perspective on the Jewish Text

Exodus: you shall not impose interest upon “My people”. Does this not include all of humanity, especially given the misery of the global suffering caused by the unjust, usurious system to millions if not billions of human beings alive today? However, there is another verse (Deuteronomy 23: 21) that states: ‘you may deduct interest from loans to foreigners’. How are the two verses to be reconciled? It sounds as though this might be a case of one rule for one, and one for another. The strict prohibition on charging interest and usury was relaxed in Judaism and later Christianity, and there is an attempt to do so in Islam now. But there are still Jews, Christians and especially Muslims who insist that interest and usury in all its forms is unjust and evil, and must be fought. Is it not time that we join this struggle?

The Proverbs are beautiful. Similar ones in the Qur'an and *hadith* literature are:

What you have shall perish. What is with God will remain.

God says, 'Spend, O son of Adam: I shall spend on you!'

A dirham spent in charity outweighed a hundred thousand dirhams: the former was given by a poor man who had nothing else; the latter was given by a rich man who had many times that amount.

'Richness is not to have many possessions: true richness is only contentment of the heart (with what one has).'

This teaching of the Prophet is similar to that of Ben Zoma, and very similar teachings are attributed to Buddha and Christ.

CHRISTIAN TEXTS

Introduction and Context

Matthew's Gospel is placed first in the New Testament, and the early Christian writers quoted from it more often than from any other Gospel. It arranges the teachings of Jesus into an orderly series of discourses—so we may imagine its author to be a teacher who is concerned to preserve and pass on the lessons of the Great Teacher whom he follows.

This passage comes from the fourth great discourse of Jesus. It is addressed to Peter and the other leading disciples, and is about how the Christian community is to manage its life until the Kingdom of Heaven comes in its fullness, and about what sort of relationships the community should embody. Chapter 18 is particularly concerned with themes of humility and forgiveness in the Christian community.

The occasion for the telling of this parable is a question from Peter about how many times he must forgive someone who wrongs him. 'As many as seven times?', he asks. Jesus replies: 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.' The parable may also be a vivid illustration (for the purposes of instruction) of what is meant in the Lord's Prayer when it says 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' (Matt. 6: 12), to which Jesus adds: 'for if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matt. 6: 14-15). It is a drama in three acts. The first is between the king and his servant, the second between the servants themselves, and the third returns to the king and his servant.

Points to Consider

- Which is the bigger failure in this parable, a failure of payment or a failure of fellowship?
- Does this passage teach us that it is a good thing to give up our claims on each other?
- The debt the servant has towards the king is an *unpayable* debt—the sum is too great for anyone to be able to afford. What does this do to our interpretation of the parable?

The Text in Tradition and Today

How are we to read this extraordinary and disconcerting parable? It's a parable that explodes towards infinity.

At one level it is about money, but it sets financial matters in a larger frame. Maybe it wants to show us monetary relations in the context of the demands of fellowship (seeing money as a *test* of fellowship; a test which the first servant fails, for he refuses to forgive his fellow servant for an obligation that is perhaps only one twenty-thousandth of one per cent as great as his own). Or maybe it wants us to think about what we owe to God—which is *everything*, if you believe that God created us and the world we exist in out of nothing. If our whole existence is 'owed', then this 'debt' is quite well represented by an unpayable sum.

The servant says to the King: 'Have patience with me and I will pay you *everything*', while the second servant says to the first servant: 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' Maybe this signals an important difference between the two debts—the one is 'infinite' and expresses the human-divine relationship, the other is quite ordinary (it ought not to be difficult to sort out with a bit of patience) and expresses the human-human relationship. The first servant fails to make any connection between the two, and this is his undoing.

If we are not to think of the king's original lending to the servant as unrealistic and unfair (what we might in today's parlance call a 'sub-prime loan!'), then we might imagine that he doesn't really expect or want the actual *sum of money* back—hence his ready 'forgiving' of the debt. So what *does* he want? Maybe the payment he really wants in the *divine*-human relation is merciful fellowship in the *human*-human relation. *That* would be adequate payment for an infinite debt. And that wouldn't of course mean that money wasn't relevant to the message of this parable—because merciful fellowship in the human-human relation will often have a lot to do with how we handle money.

There is something very striking about how much the language of emotion and of desire is to the fore in this parable. The Greek word for 'compassion' used of the king is the same word that is used of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 33, when he sees and helps a man who has been mugged; it is the same word used of the lost son's father in Luke 15 when he runs to embrace him and bring him home; and it is the same word that is used to describe Jesus's feelings when he sees the people looking 'like sheep without a shepherd'

(Matt. 9: 36; Mark 6: 34). It is a powerful, physical compassion that is suggested by the word—felt in the gut. Similarly, the distress of the ‘fellow’ servants in v. 31 is a word denoting intense feeling. Finally, the word ‘refused’ used to describe the first servant’s reaction to the second servant’s plea for mercy means literally ‘didn’t want to’. Surrounded by the strong fellow-feeling of the other figures in the story, this character is defined by a deficit of desire. Is it significant that his heart is not engaged in this parable whose last word is ‘heart’?

A Muslim perspective on the Christian Text

A beautiful passage, reminiscent of Qur’an, 24: 22, ‘... let them forgive and overlook. Do you not love that God should forgive you? And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.’

In Qur’anic Arabic, wealth is *mal*, a noun related to the verb *mala*, to incline. Wealth is known as *mal* because the heart inclines towards it. This meaning is reminiscent of Christ’s teaching in the New Testament: fill your heart with love for the treasure that is with God in Heaven.

ISLAMIC TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The text selected here is the only lengthy passage from the Qur’an that addresses the topics of charity, money, usury and debt in great detail. There are, of course, many other references to these subjects throughout the Qur’an but these tend to be scattered in individual *ayat* (verses). In fact, the passage given is only the last third of a much longer one that begins at *ayah* 261 of the *surah* (chapter) known as ‘The Cow’. The thirteen *ayat* preceding this passage are about charity and its principles: the infinite divine reward attached to sincere charity; the conditions of sincere charity, such as not reminding the recipient of the favour or exacting another favour in return; the fact that small, sincere kindnesses are blessed such that they are worth infinitely more than large but hollow, ostentatious acts of ‘charity’.

Ayat 278-9 are often quoted in discussions about usury in Muslim discourse to this day. The threat of ‘war from God and His Messenger’ in *ayah* 279 is unique in the Qur’an, and underlines the seriousness of the crime and sin of *riba* (usury, interest).

Ayah 282 is known as *Ayat al-Dayn*, the ‘Debt Verse’, and is by far the longest single *ayah* in the Qur’an, usually taking up over a page of written copies of the Qur’an. Memorisers of the Qur’an are often evaluated on how well they are able to recite this *ayah* without making mistakes.

The ‘Debt Verse’ is followed by a shorter one on the same topic; these are then followed by a majestic conclusion to ‘The Cow’, the longest *surah* of the

Qur'an; this concluding passage consists of statements of faith about God followed by extremely eloquent prayers that were recited nightly by the Prophet, peace be upon him, a practice continued until today.

Points to Consider

- *Ayah 275*: The usurers justify their practice by saying that 'trade is like usury', but God has permitted trade but forbidden usury. How do these teachings relate to the contemporary theory and practice of conventional banking and economics?
- 'Give up your demand for usury!' How is this commandment to be actualised in today's world, where we have a global financial and monetary system based on usury?
- How are the instructions given in the 'Debt Verse' to be applied in modern times?

There is one exception to the writing down of debt contracts: spot-transactions. What types of transactions are covered by this term today?

The Text in Tradition and Today

The lengthy discussion of charity followed by the resounding condemnation of *riba* (usury) in our Medinan passage here is an amplification of a principle summarised in one Meccan *ayah*: 'That which you lay out for increase through the property of (other) people will have no increase with Allah. But that which you lay out for charity, seeking the countenance of Allah, (will increase): it is these who will get a recompense multiplied.' (*Surah al-Rum*, 'The Romans' or 'Byzantines', 30: 39).

This *ayah* also illustrates the principle, as does 2: 276, that charity and usury are opposites. A simple example of this in practice is that if someone has surplus money that lies untouched for a year, the Sharia (Islamic law) demands that it decrease by 2.5%, the standard rate of *zakat* (compulsory alms), with this money going to the poor and needy. In a usurious system, that money magically increases, even if it has not been invested or the investment has made a loss. (There must be the risk of profit or loss for valid monetary gain, according to Islamic law.) Muslims maintain that *zakat* leads to redistribution of wealth and a net flow from rich to poor, whilst usury leads to the opposite. In a sense, charity is negative usury and usury is negative charity.

The arguments expressed in 2: 275 still resound today. Those who justify moneylending at interest still compare it to trade: just as one is entitled to charge for renting or hiring the use of a car or house to another, the argument is that interest is a rental charge for the use of money loaned. An Islamic counter-argument among many, shared by Jews, Christians, Hindus and others who also stick to their scriptures' original prohibition of usury and interest, is that money is not a commodity or good in itself, such that it can be hired. Rather,

*Money is a matter of functions four:
A medium, a measure, a standard, a store.*

This rhyme encapsulates the nature of money in Western and Islamic thinking: a medium of exchange; a measure of wealth; a standard for deferred payments; a store of value.

Money is thus an independent standard and evaluator that helps lubricate any economy: the natural flow and exchange of goods and services. Treating it as a good and making more money by trading in money is thus a nonsensical and unjust distortion of the nature of money. Usury and moneylending at interest result in the constant devaluation and destabilisation of the value of money and thus undermine its essential four functions. In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the value of money must be stable in principle, and the usurious element means that strictly speaking, all modern money (paper, coins or the ghastly electronic money that has almost taken over) is prohibited under Sharia. The word 'cash' used to mean real gold or silver coins, and there is a strong argument that a return to gold and silver as monetary standards can solve the world's major financial problems. In the *hadith* literature, it is recorded that the price of a sheep during the time of the Prophet was one dinar of gold, and that of a chicken one dirham of silver. It is easily observed that the price of a sheep and chicken in gold and silver respectively are the same today, i.e. gold and silver represent a currency that has maintained zero inflation over the last 1,400 years!

Usury also results in the net transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, and the increasing rich-poor divide in every country in the world, as well as globally, is a measure of this. The commercial and central banks' fraudulent practice of literally creating money out of nothing and then charging interest on it equates to an infinite rate of interest: uncontrolled usury that helps to enslave entire countries and their populations. An example of this miserable situation was seen in the UK in 2008 when £50 billion were plucked out of thin air by the government to rescue the ailing, private bank Northern Rock. Compare this to the estimate that just £1 billion would be enough to bring all of Britain's hospitals up to the high standards expected of our country: the government has megabucks to save one bank but not even peanuts to save our entire hospital infrastructure. Third-world debt is already a disgrace, where countries are trapped in the spiral of ever-increasing and unpayable debt, but now we also have *The Coming First World Debt Crisis* as in the title of a recent book by Ann Pettifor. Almost every week, we see headlines in our newspapers about Britain 'drowning in debt'.

The 'Debt Verse' obligates the writing down and witnessing of debt obligations, except if the transaction is a common, day-to-day one. This is a relative term and varies with time, place and context. I once bought a car from a friend for £1,300 with a deposit of just £200; when I offered to record the debt in writing as per the *ayah* under discussion, the friend responded that this transaction involved day-to-day sums!

The fact that the Qur'an's longest *ayah* deals with the writing down and witnessing of debts is a measure of the importance of justice in financial transactions and debts (*dayn*) in the wider context of religion or judgment (*din*). Debt, religion and (the Day of) Judgement are thus intimately related; the latter is in a sense the 'Day that Debts Fall Due'.

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